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Journalists oppose CIA disclosure exemptions

IRA R. ALLEN

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Journalists told Congress Tuesday a bill exempting key CIA files from the Freedom of Information Act would give the agency too much power to hide material from the public.

"All institutions are answerable to the American people," Steven Dornfeld, a reporter for Knight-Ridder Newspapers, told the Senate Intelligence Committee. "That ideal crumbles when secrecy for secrecy's sake erodes the responsiveness and accountability of the CIA or any other part of government."

The journalists won support from Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., a member of the panel, who said he feared the bill could become "the nose of an intelligence camel ... trying to get into the tent" by setting a precedent for other government agencies that do not want to disclose documents.

The 1974 revised Freedom of Information Act has allowed citizens - mostly journalists and historians -- to request documents from government agencies, subject only to deletions to protect other people's privacy, criminal investigations or national security.

The CIA does not now have to reveal sensitive information about its sources of information or methods, but the new bill by Sens. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., and Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., would exempt the CIA from even having to search its operational files to determine whether they are exempt.

Critics said it would be possible for the agency, which admitted engaging in illegal domestic spying in the 1960s and 1970s, to thwart legitimate requests for information by sticking them in the operational files.

The critics also said the bill needs a provision allowing judges to review CIA disclosure decisions and a time limit of perhaps 30 years after which the sensitive files could be made available for historical purposes.

CIA officials testified last week that since the files in question have never been released anyway, the search process delays legitimate requests by two to three years and could compromise the names of agents and informants.

But Durenberger, citing CIA operations that have become public, said, "It is the country that will suffer if operational files are put off limits forever."

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